

Senate Bill 15
January 22, 2009
Presented by Chris Smith
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Chris Smith, Deputy Director of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

There is no pre-historical (fossil) or historical evidence that walleye, *Sander vitreum*, occurred in Montana prior to their introduction to the state.¹ The status of walleye is uncertain and highly debated in the South Dakota portions of the Missouri River drainage. The only known walleye fossil from farther down the Missouri River Basin was discovered in Kansas. The state of North Dakota considers walleyes native in the Missouri River basin only in the southern part of the state up to the Knife River which is approximately 200 river miles from the Montana border. Walleye are also considered native in North Dakota in the Red River which is part of the Hudson Bay Watershed.

Perhaps more important, but lost in the debate over whether or not walleye are a native species is the fact that classification of walleye in statute as a native species will have no positive impact on FWP management of the species. Classifying walleye as a native species will not affect eligibility of projects to enhance walleye populations through the Future Fisheries (FF) Program. Both native species such as bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout and non-native species, like rainbow trout and walleye are eligible for FF grants. The only requirement for a FF grant is that the population must be "wild reproducing." FWP has received 27 proposals for FF grants totalling \$205,000 to benefit walleyes and has funded every request.

One possible, unintended consequence of classification of walleye as a native species is that it may actually reduce FWP's ability to produce and stock walleye from the Miles City and Ft. Peck hatcheries. FWP takes its responsibilities for maintaining the genetic purity of native species seriously. We have no source of genetically pure walleye in Montana and have reservations about bringing walleye into the state from other sources due to disease concerns.

Given the absence of scientific evidence for walleye presence in the state, and the lack of any meaningful impact of legal classification on management of the species, FWP does not see the need for this legislation.

¹Dr. C.J.D. Brown in his 1971 publication "Fishes of Montana" said of walleye: "this species is not native to Montana and we have no reliable information regarding the time and place of the first introduction." In the latest field guide for Montana fishes "A Field Guide to Montana Fishes" George D. Holton and Howard E. Johnson classify walleye as "introduced into Montana." Historical sampling records in Montana do not report walleye as being present. In the Lewis and Clark journals, no walleye were documented in Montana despite the 17 collections that were made in the Missouri River basin below the Great Falls and in the lower Yellowstone River Drainage; however, at least 5 of the 17 collections were found to contain sauger.